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British Court Takes a Look at Soviet Propaganda

LONDON — While General Secretary Gorbachev has been pushing his celebrated *glasnost* campaign these past months, the High Court in London has been providing its own look into how Russia operates. This has come in the long-awaited trial of a libel suit brought against The Economist magazine's Foreign Report newsletter by Greece's most popular daily newspaper, To Ethnos. The case was the first opportunity to subject an alleged Soviet disinformation drive to the sort of rigorous examination available in a British court.

The suit raged for nine weeks in the Law Courts. Ethnos failed to convince the

the Athens tabloid's contents as being strictly in line with the tactics and themes of the KGB's disinformation department.

The Economist argued that the foreign coverage of Ethnos, a colorful tabloid in the popular mold, was in effect hijacked by a group of pro-Soviet writers who then disseminated propaganda that distorted facts and betrayed a virulently anti-American and anti-NATO bias. Typically, the Solidarity trade-union movement in Poland emerged on Ethnos's pages as an activist center for the American CIA and the "Mafia-backed" Vatican. The paper's coverage of the pope's visit to Poland in June 1983 consisted of a five-line paragraph, whereas a considerable amount of laudatory material was printed about the declarations of Polish strong man Gen. Jaruzelski. In a two-page article on Dec. 12, 1982, Ethnos praised the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and suggested Afghanistan's anti-Soviet resistance was worse than the Nazis. It has also blamed Chernobyl on the "nuclear race" that imperialism is engaged in.

The argument The Economist brought to its defense was that within the Greek press Ethnos's tone and reasoning are unique. Also unique, The Economist argued, is the composition of the group that contributed the articles—mostly non-Greeks and Communists. What happens when Greek interests clash with Soviet ones? Such an instance arose with Prime Minister Papandreu's letter to Gen. Jaruzelski, telling him to end military law and to release political prisoners. The Greek press—with the sole exception of Ethnos—headlined the news.

During the six months covered by the alleged libel in 1981 and 1982, Ethnos ran 71 commentaries on foreign affairs, according to The Economist's analysis. All but six were written by foreigners. Of the 71 articles, 23 were written by Stanley Harrison, chief editor of England's Communist organ, the Morning Star; 18 were by Carl Marzani, a former U.S. State Department employee who served three years in prison for not disclosing Communist activities in the 1940s; 14 by Vsevolod Ovchinnikov, a correspondent and employee of Pravda, the official Soviet party organ; eight by various correspondents or employees of Novosti, the main Soviet foreign-propaganda organization; four by Constantine (Dinos) Tsakotellis, Ethnos's Foreign Editor and a Communist who put the group together; two by correspondents of the Soviet writers union's Literaturnaya Gazeta; one by Varintra Tarzia Vitatsi, and, one by Christos Theoccharatos, a Greek journalist—a panegyric to the U.S.S.R. titled "The Revolution From Which All Mankind Has Benefited."

Ethnos was launched in 1981 by a part-

nership led by George Bobolas, a wealthy Greek businessman, who in 1978 got a contract from the Soviet copyright office in Moscow to publish the Great Soviet Encyclopedia in Greek. The Bobolas group arranged the publishing deal with Col. Vasily Sitnikov, who has been identified by trial witnesses Ilya Dzhirkvelov and Kostas Mavropoulos as deputy director of the KGB's disinformation department. Mr. Bobolas testified in court that he did not know of Mr. Sitnikov's KGB connection.

Mr. Dzhirkvelov, a Soviet defector, testified for The Economist that he had participated in numerous meetings where the decision was made to use non-communist press to further Soviet goals in Greece. These goals were "to foster dislike of NATO and the U.S., to convince the public that the West was responsible for all of Greece's foreign-policy problems, and to loosen ties between Greece and the Western Alliance," he said. "I worked with Mr. Sitnikov on specific projects designed to manipulate non-communist, liberal and even rightist newspapers so as to promote Soviet interests. It was realized by us that identifiable Communist publications had little credibility. Greece was a primary target."

Mr. Mavropoulos, who was called by The Economist and who had worked for the Greek section of Radio Moscow from 1961 to 1976 and became critical of Moscow after returning to Greece to work as a journalist, testified that "during planning meetings we had at Radio Moscow, and in which Sitnikov participated, it was made clear to us that we should exploit the Greek-Turkish disputes, so as to encourage the belief that the West was to blame. We were told that other means had to be used beyond traditional Communist channels." Both witnesses testified that they found the contents of Ethnos "totally aligned" with the key themes of Soviet disinformation. The Greeks were doing a better job than some of the Soviet papers, Mr. Dzhirkvelov told the court.

At the least, the trial testimony was a series of mud balls splattered over Mr. Gorbachev's vaunted image-polishing openness campaign. Glasnost's proponents in the Kremlin could well come to see more harm to Soviet interests in the West from such disclosures than what the heavy-handed propaganda is worth. Should their views prevail, it will be interesting to see what line emerges at To Ethnos.

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Europe

By Peter Keresztes

jury, however, and it last week returned a hung verdict. Although costs from the libel case are already near \$2 million, people connected with Ethnos, which wants a victory here to help it prevail in similar cases in Greece, have stated outside the courtroom that "there will be a new trial."

The Economist followed a tough defense strategy. Its newsletter had alleged that Ethnos was started with a \$1.8 million Soviet subsidy, had a drop in circulation and sustained losses and that the losses were made up by the Russians. The newsletter's publisher presented no evidence to back up these four specific points and instead built its case on the allegations' wider implication—that Ethnos was in the pocket of Soviet propagandists.

Timothy House, a lawyer for The Economist, explained: "The plaintiffs claimed that the Foreign Report article meant that they were publishing Ethnos with a Soviet subsidy and that they were not 'part of a free press but rather the mouthpiece of a Communist and totalitarian state's propaganda machine.' Ever since we started to plead truth [as a defense], we invited the court to accept the plea that Ethnos"—and here Mr. House spoke emphatically—"never was part of a free press but rather the mouthpiece of a Communist and totalitarian state's propaganda machine. We sought directly to meet the complaint they have leveled."

Conceding the specific points — The Economist didn't even bother to bring the article's author as a witness—the London publisher did well not to lose the case outright. Civil actions seldom end in a draw, and libel cases in the U.K. are usually settled, since the publisher of an alleged libel bears the burden of proof. Ethnos's legal team probably thought it had little to worry about as The Economist portrayed